DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 128 780 CS 002 944

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TITLE A Survey of College Textbooks for Freshmen Students (A Case for Comprehension).
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (20th, Miami, Florida, October 20-23, 1976); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen; *Reading Comprehension; Sentences; *Sentence Structure; Surveys; *Textbook Evaluation

ABSTRACT

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A SURVEY OF COLLEGE TEXTBOOKS

FOR

FRESHMEN STUDENTS

(A Case for Comprehension)

Paper To Be Presented

At

The Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association

Miami, Florida

October 20-23, 1976

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Abstract

A survey of 968 sentences, (N=54), from 20 different college texts used by freshman students reveals that active sentences are the most prevalent of sentence types. Next in order were: passives, gerunds, pseudo-clefts, factives, infinitives and clefts. The author found that students made the greatest errors in distinguishing actives from passives and vice versa. He suggests that college teachers review basic sentence types with their students as an aid to reading comprehension.

Recent studies in linguistics have focused on syntactic structures as one possible means by which knowledge about a speaker's use and understanding of language may be ascertained.[1] By syntactic structures, we mean the processes which go toward the formation and interpretation (comprehension) of utterances.

It is the conviction of this investigator that much of the information gained from these linguistic studies have some bearing on the subject of reading (i.e., its content and instructional techniques).

Since the chief purpose of reading activity is to derive meaning from the printed page, and the greater portion of meaning is embedded in sentence structures, then it seems logical to suppose that adequate sentence mastery is a prerequisite to reading comprehension. It should be pointed out here that we are by no means ignoring the importance of such factors as an adequate vocabulary, proper word-attack skills, the interest and content of reading materials, the reader's experiences and so on. As a matter of fact, these factors do weigh significantly in the attainment of adequate reading skills and eventually to good comprehension on the part of the reader.[2]

Rationale

Since the majority of college/university students, especially lower division ones, (i.e. first and second-year

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1. This knowledge is for the most part unconscious. Modern linguistic and psycholinguistic theory is attempting to explain a speaker's knowledge of his/her language by writing formal rules.

2. That these other aspects of reading do weigh significantly can be attested to in the way the majority of reading curricula is structured.

students) are faced with both quantitative and qualitative aspects of reading, we believe that some reading problems may be attributed to the students' inability to comprehend sentence structures in college textbooks. It is important that we make a distinction in the medium of communication here in that we are referring to the written word as opposed to speech, gestures, songs, etc. For the majority of speakers of American English (or for that matter other varieties of English), sentence structures in actual speech situations are seldom a problem for comprehension. This is evident in spite of dialect differences between speakers of English.

One place that we could begin to make a study of sentence types is in the texts which students use in their classes. There are several reasons which govern the choice college texts for our study. First, and most obvious is that almost all lower division students are pursuing studies (reading) in the content areas: history, social science, literature, and so on. In most instances, the quality and quantity of their reading assignments differ significantly from what the students were accustomed to in high school. Second, difficulties faced in doing assignments may be attributable to the nature of sentence types which the students encounter. Third, and this may be a controversial point, the greater portion of students in this study are speakers of Black Vernacular English (BVE).[3] What this means is that there is generally syntactic and semantic

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3. By Black Vernacular English(BVE), we are referring to the everyday linguistic systems of blacks in a lower socio-economic strata. Morgan State University draws at least 80% of its students from this socio-economic group.

differences between the students' (reader's) speech and the syntactic and semantic forms in college texts.[4] For example, the passive construction with get V+en (e.g. they got beat) (they were beaten) tend to be used much more often than passives with be + en. We will discuss this topic later in our study.

Previous Studies

Previous studies have been undertaken to determine the role of sentence types and then relation to comprehension. However, these investigations vary to some extent from this study. Strickland (1962), for instance, has advocated that the teacher explore the relationship between the speech structures of children and those in the textbooks. Chall (1968) pursued studies of sentence types in texts to determine the readability level of the texts. Schlesinger (1969), in his studies, has suggested that one place to begin reaching reading is to explore the syntax of children. Finally, Cline (1973) has investigated the relationship of students' reading ability and the textbook used in community colleges. The major difference in this study and the preceding ones is that it seeks to investigate in a limited way the nature of sentence types in themselves and how they relate to meaning.

Purpose of Study

In order to have some basis for supporting the claim that reading comprehension may be related to the mastery of sentence

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4. This portion of syntactic/semantic differences may be seen if one checks the themes or essays which the average student writes.

structures in college texts, this investigator has conducted a survey of college texts with the aid of students enrolled in Developmental Reading 101 at Morgan State University. The purpose of the study is two-fold: a) to determine a hierarchy of sentences in college texts, and b) to determine by some empirical means the syntactic knowledge that students have of the sentence types in their texts. A word of caution is needed here. This study is exploratory in nature and has not been sufficiently subjected to the rigors of more controlled studies.

Conduct of Study

The subjects in this study are freshman students enrolled in Developmental Reading 101 at Morgan State University. These students are required to take Reading 101 as a result of their test scores received from the Sequential Test of Educational Progress (STEP). Students are required to take this Reading course if their scores are below a certain cut-off point. The cut-off point is 24 out of a possible 60 points. Of 79 students who participated in the survey, only 54 could be included in the study for reasons which we will give shortly. Of this number, there were 37 females and 17 males. No attempt was made to have an equal samplying of males and females as is usually the case in more controlled studies which involve experimental and control groups.[5]

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5. In other words, as it pertains to this study, the statistical evidence for both experimental and control groups was not a central factor here. The same thing may be said in comparing the performances of males and females in the survey of sentence types.

Each student was supposed to look at every other chapter, every other paragraph for a total of three paragraphs, and every other sentence for a total of three sentences.[6] In some instances, only two sentences could be selected from a given paragraph. This meant that a paragraph had to have at least three sentences if the students were to choose either sentence 1-3 and 5, or sentence 2-4 and 6. In order to minimize duplication of sentences - although this could not be avoided, each section of students had to choose either the odd or even number of both paragraphs and sentences.

In order to be sure that the students knew what they were required to do, the teacher illustrated examples of basic sentence types (actives, passives, infinitives, clefts, gerunds, pseudo-clefts, and factives) (See Appendix-I for examples) with the participation of the students. The teacher then proceeded to work some examples from a text in order to be sure that student followed the instructions. Ideally, we would like to have administered a test in reading comprehension in order to determine the correlation of reading comprehension ability to the identification of sentence types. If the results of such a test proved to be significant enough, then it would add further support to our overall study regarding the students' knowledge of sentence types and their ability to arrive at comprehension.

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6. The methodology adopted here is similar to that employed in sociological sampling procedures. The extent of the data is contingent on purpose and expediency of the research.

Sifting

As is usually the case in acquiring data, some precautions must be taken if the study is to be representative of some pheonomenon. In our study, the data that we have gathered pertains to sentence types. In order to have some degree of reliability for our data, the following steps were taken: 1) if there were two sentences joined by a semi-colon, the latter was included in the study, 2) students whose responses to the sentence types were rather weak were not included in the study. It could have been that they did not follow the directions fully, or they were absent when such directions were given, or they were not able to make the distinction between sentences, 3) only a representative number of sentences were included in the study,[7] (i.e., 10 or more sentences), and 4) if the student gave two different sentence types as the answer to a given sentence, it was omitted from the study.

It is also possible that some sentences were counted more than once in the study because some students used the same textbooks. This could not be avoided since one of the aims of the study was to determine just what each student knew about the types of sentences encountered in his/her textbook.

Results

In terms of a hierarchy of sentence types (See Table I) we find that actives are the most numerous sentence types. Of

7. The investigator has to use his judgment here in determining what constitutes a good effort of response on the student's part.

a total of 968 sentences processed 55.8% were actives, 12.6% were passives, 3.1% were gerunds, 1.5% were pseudo-clefts, 1.4% were factives, 1.3% were infinites and clefts. The remaining 23% of the sentences, although marked as incorrect on the students' part were counted in the study by the investigator in order to determine the totality of sentence types. Of this number, 17.3% were actives, 5% were passives, the remainder 7% of the sentences fell within the sentence types of clefts for actives and gerunds for participles.

It could be argued that actives would be the most dominant of sentence types in college textbooks as opposed to other sentence types such as passives, clefts or infinitives. This is a sound proposition and few would disagree on this point. As a matter of fact, most textbooks which treat the subject of clarity and expressivity in writing advocate the use of actives where possible.

Now that we have established a hierachy of sentence types from our data, we need to address the second issue of this study: What empirical evidence can we use to ascertain the students' knowledge of the sentence types given above?[8] One means of ascertaing the knowledge that students have of sentence types is to look at the types of "mistakes" which students make in their assessment of sentence types. A similar line of reasoning

8. We are using the term "knowledge" partly in the sense of the ability to do and also partly in the sense of what students know of the language which, as we said before, may be an unconscious phenomenon.

is usually evoked by teachers in the administering of examinations in that exams provide the teacher with information regarding what the students do know and what they do not know. Again, since the study of what individuals know about language is subject to varying viewpoints, some word of caution is required here as we proceed. We are assuming that since 99.9% of the students who responded to the survey are native speakers of English (e.e., English is their mother tongue) then at some basic level of analysis, both linguistic systems (i.e. the language of the texts, and that of the respondent) should come together if comprehension is to be achieved.[9]

When we examine our data, we find that students made mistakes more often in differentiating between actives and passives. Quantitatively, this would be obvious since actives and passives are the most prevalent of sentence types found in our data. This does not mean, however, that there are not other mistakes made with other types of sentences.[10] Since the time given for presenting this paper is limited, we will focus on the most dominant kinds of mistakes made in differentiating sentence types.

Students made mistakes in two major categories: 1) confusing actives with passives, and 2) confusing passives for actives.

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9. This becomes a basic consideration if meaning is to be obtained by the reader.

10. For instance, it was found that students made mistakes quite often in differentiating between actives and clefts and between gerunds and participles.

Let us treat each of these sub-topics separately.

With respect to the first of these mistakes - the confusing of actives with passives - some examples are:

A.1 "The world today is dominated by technology..."

A.2 "Much of the information...has been established relatively recently."

A.3 "We are immersed in a world..."

A.4 "Sex discrimination was long defended on the ground that..."

Concerning the category of mistakes - the confusing of passives with actives, some examples are:

P.1 "He was not sure, however, about the specific direction."

P.2 "Technology has been a blessing to mankind."

P.3 "A related result of mechnization has been the same tendency toward concentration."

P.4 "Nationalism was a wider national market."

Discussion

We have listed above some examples of the most frequent kinds of mistakes regarding sentence types in college textbooks. What does this kind of information reveal about the students' knowledge of sentence types? Specifically, actives and passives further, yet, is comprehension hindered as a result of the misinterpretation of these particular sentence types by students?

If we look closely at the sentences in both categories we find that they appear to be similar in terms of their"surface

structure manifestation. In other words, the structure of the elements which comprise the sentence the way it is uttered is: NP + be + MV where NP or noun phrase represents the subject of the sentence, some part of the verb "to be" is used, either as an auxiliary or a main verb followed by MV or the main verb.

We cannot make a blanket statement to the effect that students cannot distinguish between actives and passives or vice-versa. On the contrary, we know that they can make this distinction since they are native speakers of English.[11] The inability to make the kinds of distinction as evident from the examples above may be due in part to the close relatedness of the surface forms of the sentences in both categories listed above.

We also find that in sentences A.2-A.4 the agent by + NP (e.g. He was bitten by the dog) is deleted and this might be the reason why students may be confusing actives with passives. Or, when it is present in a sentence like A.1 it could be that students only consider agents (action done by) as human beings. In this case, since technology is marked [-human], then technology could not possible have been the agent of the verb dominate.

That similarity of surface sentences, which may be the issue here, seems related to current studies in psycholinguistics, studies by C. Chomsky (1969) and others have shown that subjects usually confuse similarity of surface sentences. Examples of

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11. It could not have been the case that students were merely guessing sentence types since they themselves must be able to make a distinction between the "doer" or person or thing done to.

such confusion generally cited in the literature are:

S.1 John is easy to see

S.2 John is eager to see

Although both sentences have identical surface structures (i.e. Subject John + be + adjective + infinitive complement), we find that they have different semantic interpretations. In sentence S.1, it is "someone" who finds it easy to see John, that is, John is the "object" of the verb "to see", on the other hand; in sentence S.2, it is John who initiates the action or is "subject" of the verb "to see." The point to be made here is that there are semantic differences in sentences even if their surface forms may appear quite similar. Thus, this may be one reason why students are experiencing problems in differentiating between actives and passives.

Another reason which we may offer for the lack of clarity between actives and passives on the part of the students may be due to the students' use of alternate forms of constructing the passive. The evidence here is partly sociolinguistic in nature. By sociolinguistic, we mean the correlation of social factors (i.e age, sex, style, economic status etc.) with linguistic ones. For a large number of lower-class black speakers, the passive constructions with get + V-en seem to be used more often than the "standard" construction which involves be + V-en.[12]

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12. The evidence here is quantitative. In other words, in a given set of constructions which involves the passive, speakers are more likely to use the passive construction with get + en than with be + en. The nature of the verb in question would also influence the speaker/writer's choice of get or be passive.

For example, the "standard" utterance "They were beaten", for many speakers of BVE, would be "They got beat/whupped."[13]

Although we cannot say for sure whether or not comprehension is hindered by alternate language structures, it may suggest that the students do not have, at least quantitatively, an expressive command of passive constructions which involve be + V-ed. Therefore, comprehension of textbooks forms of passives may be difficult for the reader to assess quite rapidly or he/she may be simply confused by such constructions.

What this investigator did find to be the case was that the majority of students tend to process or possess at least orally, syntactic structures based on the surface forms of sentences.[14] It was only after prompting and analyzing of constituents that they realized the difference between surface and deep (i.e., semantic) aspects of sentence structures. For example, in analyzing the sentence - "They were arrested last week," many students proceeded as follows: the subject was "They", the verb was "were arrested" and "last week" an adverb of time. However, when they were asked who did the arresting, some students initially said "They". Immediately, they change the answer to someone or somebody or even a police officer(s). Again, the point here is that we can use the latter kind of evidence to illustrate that comprehension is not always lost on the part of the students.

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13. The speaker writer may even omit the passive and maintain the active construction: They beat them."

14. It could also have been that the students were processing sentence structures based on rules of grammar acquired in traditional English classes.

Summary

In this brief study, our aim was to establish a hierarchy of sentence types in college textbooks, and to look for some empirical basis for determining the students' knowledge of such sentences. We found that actives were the most prevalent of sentence types followed by passives, gerunds, pseudo-clefts, factives, infinitives, and clefts in that order. We also found that students made mistakes much more frequently in differentiating between actives and passives and vice versa. We said that (this)lack of clarity of these sentence types may be due to: (a) similarity of surface structures between actives and passives, (b) alternate language constructions for passives, or (c) the nature of processing semantic information.

Brief though this study might have been, it does have some implication for teachers involved in reading and language arts activity, English teachers, or teachers in the content areas. We suggest that teachers conduct a cursory survey of text books sentences and try to correlate this information with the knowledge that students have of sentences. The teacher might need to review briefly the most prevalent kinds of sentence structures and point out such things as reduncancy, paraphrase, and synonymy. Informally, they might want to identify rules of deletion, and embedded structures. Such an approach may be one way to determine just why students may be having difficulties in reading.

APPENDIX

The following sentences show the kinds of sentence types discussed in this study. The sentence: John hit the ball was used by the investigator to point out the various sentence types to the students:

1. John hit the ball (Active)
2. The ball was hit by John (Passive)
3. To hit the ball is John's delight.(Infinitive)
4. John's hitting the ball came as no surprise to me (Gerund)
5. The fact that John hit the ball surprised me (Factive)
6. What John did was to hit the ball (Pseudo-cleft)
7. It was the ball that John hit (Cleft)

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